RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

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TRANSITIONAL HOUSING: OBJECTIVES, INDICATORS OF SUCCESS, AND OUTCOMES

INTRODUCTION

Some homeless adults, youth, and families require support as well as housing to stabilize their lives, perhaps due to histories of abusive treatment, addictions, mental health problems, or lack of employment skills. Transitional housing is intended to offer a supportive living environment and tools and opportunities for social and skills development. Several federal government programs are funding the development of new transitional housing projects to address homelessness, but there is little research that assesses the effectiveness of this model.

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on a review of the literature focused on the program objectives, indicators of success, and outcomes of transitional housing, as well as nine case studies. Appended to the report is a partial inventory of more than 75 transitional housing projects across Canada.

Case Studies

Projects that reflect a range of housing form and living arrangements, program models, and target groups were selected from a cross-country inventory of transitional housing. They range from detached houses and self-contained units to single rooms with shared facilities. Some have highly structured programs with mandatory attendance for a fixed maximum time period, while others have open-ended stays and are flexible in their approach.

The groups served by the nine case study projects include:

- Aboriginal male youth with addictions issues,
- single women,
- mixed singles with addictions, psychiatric disabilities, or who are HIV+,
- single women and transgendered persons engaged in prostitution,
- seniors leaving abusive situations,
- refugees,
- single mothers, and
- young pregnant women.

Where outcome data was available, from 66% to 90% of the residents moved to permanent housing or achieved other forms of success.

Each of the case studies includes a description of the program and program site, program objectives, requirements of participants, number of residents, lengths of stay, funding sources, measures of success, documented outcomes (where available), and program issues and challenges, as well as a contact source for more information. The projects studied are:

- Lookout Emergency Aid Society, Vancouver
- Princess Rooms, Vancouver
- Crossroads Duplex, Edmonton
- The Edmonton Seniors Safe House
- Beatrice House, Toronto
- Native Child and Family Centre of Toronto
- Romero House, Toronto
- Appartements supervisés Augustine Gonzalez, Montreal
- Le Chaînon – Transition Unit and Maison Yvonne-Maisonneuve, Montreal

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FINDINGS

Transitional Housing Models

Transitional housing is conceptualized as an intermediate step between emergency crisis shelter and permanent housing. It is more long-term, service-intensive, and private than emergency shelters, yet remains time-limited to stays of three months to three years. It is meant to provide a safe, supportive environment where residents can overcome trauma, begin to address the issues that lead to homelessness or kept them homeless, and begin to rebuild their support network.

Program models range from medical treatment to community economic development. They tend to cluster at the ends of a continuum from service-intensive facilities with rigorous expectations of residents ("high demand" programs) to programs with flexible requirements and optional services ("low demand"). Transitional housing is distinguished from supportive housing primarily in its length of residency – supportive housing is permanent.

Groups who have reportedly benefited from transitional housing include:

- those who are recovering from traumas;
- those who have a background of multi-generational poverty and lack a supportive social network;
- emancipated youth, or adults coming from institutions with little or no independent living experience;
- young mothers and pregnant teenagers;
- immigrants;
- those needing education and job skills; or
- those who have on-going service needs due to mental or physical health problems or disabilities, addictions, or are HIV positive.

In the United States, federal funding has fueled the development of well over 500 transitional housing projects for homeless singles and families over the past two decades. Many communities continue to build transitional housing, although the model's critics view it as institutional, stigmatizing, and a drain on resources better used for permanent housing. Certainly, the model's success is predicated on the availability of move-on permanent housing and supportive community-based services.

Objectives and Indicators of Success

The overall objective of transitional housing is to provide people with the structure and support they need to address critical issues necessary to maintain permanent housing and maximize self-sufficiency. At minimum, it is hoped that program 'graduates' will not use the emergency shelter system or become homeless again.

Programs vary in their demands and expectations of residents according to the subgroup served, how barriers to stable housing are conceived, and how those barriers can be practically overcome. This is reflected in eligibility criteria, the extent and rigidity of rules and restrictions, and the basis for involuntary program discharges. Programs that focus on behavioural change or treatment usually mandate participation in daily program activities and require applicants to demonstrate motivation. Programs that focus on access to services are more flexible about program compliance, more forgiving, and less structured.

The wide range of program objectives has implications for evaluation purposes. To the extent that objectives differ, programs are unique and cannot be compared with each other. Since all programs aim to improve housing status, that aspect is comparable, although it may be measured in different ways.

Commonly applied indicators of success are:

- stable residency, once permanent housing is provided;
- greater reliance on employment rather than income support programs; and
- increased income from employment or welfare programs.

Program evaluators have used different definitions and measures of 'housing success'. Some simply ascertain that participants do not return to a shelter on program exit; others distinguish post-program housing type and living arrangements. There is disagreement on the value of some outcomes, such as moving in with family or friends. And very few studies have determined former residents' housing situations beyond a follow-up period of 3 to 12 months, so long-term housing stability has rarely been defined or measured.

Other indicators of increased self-sufficiency (usually meaning financial independence) have been applied, such as obtaining employment and upgrading education credentials. More specific behavioural changes and improvements may be measured, such as parenting and household management skills, psychological well-being, social skills, family relationships, reduced hospitalizations, and maintaining sobriety.

Program Outcomes

Two Canadian studies evaluated transitional housing projects for families and found mixed results. Both stressed the need to provide subsidized permanent housing and transitional support services so that families could develop stable social connections and neighbourhood supports.

Virtually every evaluative study of transitional housing has demonstrated some degree of post-program improvement in housing status and a significant reduction in the number of residents who return to a state of homelessness on exiting the program. Overall, about half of participants go on to permanent housing. More of those who complete their programs obtain housing than those who leave before the end of the program.

Projects that are able to provide subsidized housing or housing subsidies for their graduates have higher rates of success in terms of achieving permanent housing. All programs offer assistance in locating and obtaining housing, but not necessarily housing that is affordable or desirable to participants.

It is unknown whether improvements in housing status are maintained over the long term. But the small number of studies that have followed former residents, usually for a period of three to twelve months post-program, have generally shown a small degree of drop-off in housing status during that relatively brief time.

Improvements in financial and employment status have been modest, especially among families. A variety of other changes in behaviour, acquisition of skills, or health status have been reported. Whether transitional housing is the best means of promoting such change is unknown.

SUGGESTED AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The knowledge base for transitional housing practice and research is still too limited to ascertain which practices and program models are most effective in helping formerly homeless people to stay adequately housed. Published studies frequently lack control or comparison groups. Long-term effects of transitional housing and the impacts of various types of case management are unknown.

CONCLUSIONS

The research indicates the following:

- Transitional housing programs are more effective than services alone.
- There is evidence of short term success in improving housing status.
- Other improvements are varied and modest.
- There is very limited experience and research on transitional housing in Canada.
- Permanent housing and community services are critical to the success of transitional housing.
- It appears that the Canadian experience of transitional housing projects differs in some respects from that of the United States: on a proportional basis, there are fewer projects for families than individuals, more projects for youth than adults, and more programs that are flexible and focus on access to services rather than individual behavioural change.

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Housing Research at CMHC

Under Part IX of the *National Housing Act*, the Government of Canada provides funds to CMHC to conduct research into the social, economic and technical aspects of housing and related fields, and to undertake the publishing and distribution of the results of this research.

This fact sheet is one of a series intended to inform you of the nature and scope of CMHC's research.

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